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ABSTRACT

Reauthorization of the Vocational Education Act is being considered at a time when technological developments are changing the skill requirements of the labor force. The challenge of training and retraining must be met by a partnership of the governmental, business, and educational sectors. A federal leadership role is crucial in guiding allocation of vocational education resources, establishing standards of excellence, and devising coordinated national strategies to meet the long-term skill development needs of the nation. The federal role should be to stimulate targeted efforts to enhance quality and improve equipment and facilities; keep curricula and personnel up to date; serve special populations; eliminate sex bias; and increase cooperation between business, industry, education, and other training programs. In addition to a strong federal role, reauthorization legislation should emphasize flexibility in regulations; planning and evaluation; the determination of resource allocation at the state level; the concept of sole state agency; and autonomous national, state, and local advisory councils for vocational education. (SK)

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VOCATIONAL EDUCATION: THE FEDERAL ROLE

POSITION STATEMENT

BY THE

NATIONAL ADVISORY COUNCIL ON VOCATIONAL EDUCATION

ON

REAUTHORIZATION OF THE VOCATIONAL EDUCATION ACT

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
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POSITION STATEMENT ON REAUTHORIZATION OF THE VOCATIONAL EDUCATION ACT

We face a challenging task in the latest reauthorization of the Vocational Education Act. The decisions which will be made over the course of the coming year will impact on the shape of the vocational education enterprise for many years to come. We are laying the framework for our entry into the Twenty-First Century.

We already are beyond the threshold of a new era of profound worldwide changes in technology which will have far-reaching consequences on the way we work, the skills we need, and how we apply them, on teaching and learning, on business and the way it is conducted, on national productivity, and on our economy. We are likely to see telescoped into a few short years the same degree of change and progress which has occurred over the past two hundred years. The changes we must deal with are structural in nature, not the kind of cyclical disruption that often in the past was self-correcting. A large percentage of those out of work today will never return to their regular jobs. There are less and less job opportunities for the unskilled. We must begin now to prepare for the challenges and opportunities which the future will bring.

If we are to meet the challenges of the future, we must have commitment and leadership in all sectors and at all levels of our society. There will undoubtedly be jolts and dislocation in our economy and in society. We can minimize these, however, if we all work together -- government, business, and education. President Reagan, in his State of the Union

address, said: "Education, training and retraining are fundamental to our success . . . Labor, management and government at all levels can and must participate in improving these tools of growth." The quality of the education and training of our citizens in light of these changes will be a significant factor in determining our Nation's future role. We cannot take a laissez-faire position on the education of our citizens and the training of our workforce. These are of fundamental concern to any future national endeavors. Investment in economic development will yield poor returns without equal investment in human development.

The Federal Role

There obviously is strong national interest in rebuilding a cadre of skilled workers to increase the Nation's productivity. It should be recognized that vocational education is the most economic and competent deliverer of training services for the vast majority of people. A federal leadership role is crucial in guiding vocational and technical education resources to meet changing needs. It can also help promote and establish a standard of excellence which will assure a skilled workforce able to perform the tasks required of business, industry, the defense establishment, and others. The focus of federal involvement should be to help enhance the quality and expand the capacity of vocational education to meet the challenges which the future will bring, which indeed are already being thrust upon us today.

The success or failure of vocational education lies ultimately at the local level, in the classroom, and in the community. However, we cannot expect

16,000 diverse school districts, or even 56 States and Territories, acting separately, to galvanize into a collective force to identify the problems and opportunities which the future holds, much less plan programs and devise coordinated strategies which respond to long-term skill development needs of our economy, without guidance and assistance. There should be, from the federal level, motivation, support, and leadership to help define the larger picture and serve as a catalyst for our collective efforts.

The following statement, The Need for a Continuing Strong Federal Partnership Role in Vocational Education, reflects the Council's concerns in these areas:

> As the national debate continues on the division of responsibility for education, the place of education within the federal establishment, and the level of education budgets, the National Advisory Council on Vocational Education makes the following statement in support of a continuing, strong federal partnership role in vocational education.
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> A strong vocational education program is essential for national economic recovery, as well as economic growth. While education is primarily the responsibility of state and local jurisdictions, vocational education programs need to be of sufficient scope and quality to meet national skilled workforce requirements.
>
> Vocational education should be part of a National Human Resource Policy designed to complement a larger policy of economic revitalization and new capital investment.
>
> The training of a skilled labor force requires close partnership between education and the private sector. Vocational education requires the involvement and expertise of business and labor in the planning and design of its programs, in order to assure high quality and relevance. Education provides the pool of workers from which business and industry can draw to meet its increasing needs for new, technolgically literate employees. Eighty percent of new jobs are in small businesses. Most of these smaller firms do not have the capacity or time to mount full-scale training

programs. Most businesses which train, do so on a job-specific basis, and need people who have basic occupational skills upon which to base the more specific training.

With leadership and commitment, people with special needs can have access to quality programs.

Historically, federal involvement in vocational education (e.g., the Morrill and Smith-Hughes Acts) has responded to national needs -- the move from an agricultural to an industrial economy, support of war efforts, post-war economic adjustment, and training to overcome foreign competition. The need has never been greater than it is now as we strive to strengthen our competitive stance and our defense posture in a new age of specialized technology.

Skills and knowledge should be current, should be consistent with the needs of the labor market, should complement national needs, and should be transportable. The transport factor is especially important for the disadvantaged and displaced workers who should be trained to be highly mobile as they leave depressed urban and rural areas in search of greater opportunity. A welder trained in Lexington, Kentucky, or Brooklyn, New York, should be able to function on the job in Houston, Texas, or Seattle, Washington.

We repeat the call made by this Council in 1975, "to reclaim the skills and productivity of the American people," as a matter of National Policy. In that statement, the Council said:

> "America is rapidly losing the technical superiority that has been the base of our prosperity, and our proudest export. Our competitive position in world markets was built on the superb technical skills and productivity of our people. We are losing that edge. We must reclaim it."

We urge that the focus be on assisting States in upgrading, modernizing, and expanding vocational programs to help achieve our Nation's economic goals. We urge Congress to continue bi-partisan support for education, and to scrutinize carefully any proposals which would weaken vocational education.

The Current Act

Great strides have been made under the Vocational Education Act of 1963, and the Amendments of 1968 and 1976. Today 16.3 million students of all ages are enrolled in vocational education of some kind. Nearly six million

are in full-scale programs developing specific occupational skills. There are 278,500 teachers at all levels. Secondary schools and area vocational-technical centers with five or more vocational programs number 9,200. There are 2,000 technical institutes, community colleges, and other postsecondary schools providing vocational education.

The Vocational Education Act was designed to stimulate state and local dollars for expanding vocational education by requiring a 50-50 match. In this strictly monetary respect, it has succeeded, with state and local money now overmatching by an average of 9 to 1. The current federal contribution of $784 million is matched by state and local funding of over $6 billion. It should be noted, however, that the overmatch occurred at a time when states generally were enjoying budget surpluses. It is likely to shrink now as states are forced to shift priorities in response to decreasing revenue.

Funding for vocational education pales in comparison to what is spent on higher education in America. We spend far more on preparation and support of those students going to four-year colleges than we do in vocational and technical education. Vocational education represents only 5.2% of the $15 billion dollars appropriated last year by Congress for education.

Yet a vast majority of students will never complete a four-year baccalaureate degree. Those who do not finish, as well as many who do, are unprepared and lack the skills needed to compete in today's job market. In many instances, the jobs are there, listed in long columns in the Sunday papers. But they are jobs requiring specific skills. The untrained and unskilled, as well as highly educated generalists, do not qualify. Many are returning now to vocational and technical programs to get the skills they need. It is no longer the level of education, but the kind of education, which determines success.

The Federal Government spends billions of dollars a year on remedial-type job training programs to correct deficiencies which should have been addressed through the education system in the first place. In its second report, in 1969, this Council called on the Federal Government to "invest at least as much money in reducing the flow of untrained youth as it invests in reducing the pool of the unemployed."

With today's economic dislocations and the large number of adults who need retraining, the situation goes beyond the problem of untrained youth. Obviously, vocational education alone will not stem the tide. It can, however, make a significantly greater contribution, in cooperation with business, industry, and government, if given the opportunity and the resources.

Principles for Reauthorization

In the past 20 years, since the 1963 Act, the Federal-state-local partnership has made a substantial investment in building the capacity of vocational-technical education. We must continue that partnership now to assure that, as a national priority, this capacity is fully utilized, properly focused, and improved and expanded where needed. That priority is of such importance, we believe, that the attention of Congress should be directed solely at vocational-technical education, and there should be no consolidation with any other program at this time. The National Advisory Council believes that the following set of principles should be the basis for reauthorization of the Vocational Education Act:

Targeted Priorities

The federal role in this partnership should be to stimulate specific targeted efforts to make certain that there is a correct match between the skills taught and the jobs which will be available.

These efforts are:

1. Enhancing quality,
2. Improving equipment and facilities,
3. Keeping curricula and personnel abreast of new technology,
4. Serving handicapped and disadvantaged persons, and eliminating sex bias and stereotyping,
5. Retraining displaced workers and other non-traditional students,
6. Developing programs in new and emerging occupations,
7. Increasing cooperation between business, industry, education, and other training programs,
8. Helping find innovative approaches to accomplish these priorities.

In general, available federal funds should be limited to the following uses:

-- program improvement activities, such as above,
-- program leadership at federal, state and local levels,
-- expansion of existing programs of high quality to serve greater numbers of young people and adults,
-- establishment of new programs to meet new skill training needs, and
-- other activities, for which state and local funds may not be available, which will promote quality and excellence in vocational education.

Economic Development:

The strength of the workforce is a significant factor in the productivity of our Nation, and our competitive position in world markets. Each billion dollars of exports of manufactured goods represents 25,000 jobs. Vocational

education should be a major tool in economic development strategies. It will require cooperative federal, state, and local encouragement, support, and leadership to make it a fully effective tool capable of responding to rapidly changing skill needs. Closer linkages between business, industry, and vocational education must be forged covering a broad range of activities designed to improve the relevancy and currency of vocational programs, and to improve the match between skills and jobs.

There should be incentives for business to join in a cooperative effort with vocational education in planning for changing technology and skill requirements; for retraining and upgrading the skills of existing workers in industry before they become unemployed; for job-specific training for new or expanding businesses; for business donations, loans, and making available use of on-site equipment and facilities; for expanded cooperative education-work experiences; and interaction of business and education for an exchange of teachers and workers between the work site and the classroom.

The National Advisory Council held a series of regional hearings during April and May, 1983, in cooperation with the State Advisory Councils on Vocational Education, and the National Commission for Employment Policy, at which it heard from more than 60 representatives of business, industry, and labor on their expectations of vocational education in increasing productivity, and how to promote closer working relations between education and the business community.

We believe that business and industry are ready and willing for such cooperative efforts. The National Advisory Council was impressed by the results of a survey conducted by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce of 1,400 personnel directors, which indicated substantial support for greater involvement of business with vocational education. The survey showed that business firms work with schools to advance vocational education in a variety of ways, including co-op programs, apprenticeship-type arrangement, and internships. Three out of five indicated a willingness to have students gain experience on their firm's equipment. Twenty-three percent said they would welcome students into their firms for practical work experience, and would provide supervision; 13 percent said they would do so if the schools provided supervision; and 24 percent said they were already doing it. The conclusion to be drawn from the survey is that vocational education is perceived as being effective in preparing students for employment, that there are opportunities for making it more effective, and that business would like to work with vocational education to improve effectiveness. The National Advisory Council has been working with the U.S. Chamber of Commerce in developing this survey data, along with case studies of exemplary business-education cooperative efforts, into a publication which will be useful to both the business community and educators.

Special Populations:

The needs of special populations, such as the disadvantaged, handicapped, displaced workers and homemakers, and the limited English-speaking, must

be addressed. Continued efforts to overcome sex bias and stereotyping should also be emphasized. A portion of federal funds should be targeted at providing the special services which may be needed to assist such persons in gaining access to and completing vocational programs. States should be given the flexibility and the responsibility for allocating those funds among eligible groups, according to the needs within each state.

Flexibility:

There should be less paperwork, prescriptiveness, and regulation, in all aspects of the Act. Federal purposes and priorities should be clearly stated, but states should have flexibility in addressing those priorities and allocating funds according to the unique needs and conditions within each state.

Planning and Evaluation:

The state plan should realistically describe the goals of the state in relation to national priorities. The evaluation process should include an accountability report which would document achievements toward those goals, and provide for updating and revising goals as conditions change. This would permit the Department of Education to ascertain that federal funds were being used for priority purposes. The Department's role should be to provide technical assistance and information to help achieve the national priorities.

Allocation of Resources:

Secondary and postsecondary institutions have played an increasingly important role over the past decade in vocational education, far beyond the

investment provided at the federal level. Consistent with the principle of state flexibility, the allocation of the federal funds among educational levels should be determined at the state level. There should be provisions to assure that all educational levels are represented in the planning and allocation decisions, and that articulation between secondary and postsecondary programs are emphasized.

Sole State Agency:

The sole state agency concept should be retained. This permits each state the flexibility to determine which form of governance best meets its circumstances and needs, and to assign the leadership and accountability functions. The state may designate any existing board or agency, or may create a separate entity to function as the sole state agency. Each state operates differently. To impose a governance structure from the federal level could jeopardize the investment and progress which has been made in the states over the years, and lead to possible duplication of effort.

Advisory Councils:

Autonomous national, state, and local advisory councils should be required. Majority representation on the councils must be from business and industry, to help strengthen the cooperative efforts which are needed between education and the private sector. The visibility of vocational education in the past two decades has come about directly, in large part, from activities of the advisory councils at all levels. Councils exemplify the importance of citizen input to the education system, and assure that the decisions which affect the lives of our children and our fellow workers are made with the best information available, and not just within the four walls of the

education administrator's office. The input of business, industry, labor, and other interested parties should start at the grass roots level and permeate throughout the system, up to the state and national levels. The role of State Advisory Councils should be clarified by emphasizing their advisory function in the initial planning stages, in order that planners have the benefit of the Council perspective early on regarding upgrading and improving programs and policy.

The National Advisory Council believes that these principles can form the basis for a more effective federal partnership role in the future.